

Choosing the right condo security upgrades

As condominium residents become more knowledgeable about the responsibilities of a condominium corporation and management, the security of the building is quickly becoming a more frequent topic of discussion at many board meetings and AGMs. When added to the number of security incidents that occur, it is no wonder that this topic is getting so much attention by investors and tenants alike.

BY SCOTT HILL



A recent survey from TD Canada Trust found that in Toronto, 94 per cent of investors listed security as their number-one consideration when looking to purchase a condominium. However, many condominiums' security systems could use some improvement.

Usually, condominiums face a challenge when looking to upgrade the security of their building, which is a lack of planning. In order to upgrade and enhance the security of the condominium complex, the first step is to review and evaluate the effectiveness of the security solutions that are already in place. Security solutions can be made up of people (concierge, security guards), technology (cameras, fobs) or policies/procedures (rules, education).

Security audit

A proper review of the existing security plan takes the form of a security audit. A professional security audit will assess the security of the building, identify and rank any vulnerabilities according to the risk to the condominium, and propose solutions to address the security deficiencies. This is the beginning of having a security master plan for the condominium. Oftentimes, the above-mentioned audit is commissioned in advance of the corporation updating its reserve fund study.

A note of caution must be interjected to ensure that condominiums are receiving proper information when undertaking a security audit. Frequently, a CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) audit is conducted and is incorrectly referred to as a security audit. Condo managers would do well to ensure that their security auditor is familiar with both condominium operations and security best practices. It should be specified in the scope of work that the auditor visit the condominium at various times of day in order to effectively judge the security systems in place.

As mentioned, condominiums may address security vulnerabilities with one or more of three potential solutions.

Personnel

Security personnel, known as concierges or security guards, are on-site staff that protect the property by controlling access, responding to security concerns and reporting all incidents. Security staff is the most effective security solution, but it is also the most expensive. For



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this reason, condominiums with security staff should ensure that they are receiving the best value for their investment. A review of the security staff should be included in a professional security audit, but below are a few pointers for condominium management to be aware of.

Security guards are legislated by the Private Security and Investigative Services Act, much like condominiums are legislated by the Ontario Condominium Act and the Protecting Condominium Owners Act. The Act states that all security personnel must be licensed by the province and must carry this license at all times while at work. Security guards' duties and expectations for each individual condominium should be laid out in a professional document called post orders. While condominium management is not usually provided a copy of the post orders, this document should be reviewed/ approved on a regular basis and updated when the situation requires it. In addition, the condominium should regularly receive shift reports from the guards and review any incident reports at board meetings.

As with the commissioning of a security audit, condominiums should ensure that any contracted security company is familiar with condominium operations. The condominium industry seems to be slowly moving away from management decisions based solely on the lowest cost and transitioning to a more balanced decision matrix that evaluates both performance of the company and cost.

As security staff is one of the more expensive security solutions, the condominium should ensure that the guards are professional and knowledgeable on condominium security. One of the largest complaints seen in multiple security audits is a lack of consistency with guards being assigned to the property. This is usually the result of awarding the security contract to the lowest bidder, who in turn must compensate

by keeping the wages of the employees low. This results in a reduction of professional morale and significant staff turnover.

Technology

As with all things technological, rapid advancements in development results in prices dropping for the consumer. Security technologies that would be outside many budgets 10 years ago are now readily available for purchase online at a fraction of the cost. However, condominiums are advised to exercise extreme caution when purchasing do-it-yourself security solutions.

Technology should be selected to integrate into the overall security plan. A security review of the current equipment in place will highlight any gaps as well as emphasize what equipment needs to be upgraded and when that should take place.

For example, a security audit was conducted at a condo that was suffering from bike thefts. A camera was installed but was not of any use because there was not enough security lighting in the vicinity to produce an image that could be used to identify the perpetrators. The condominium was looking to upgrade to a higher resolution camera with IR (infrared) capabilities. The recommendation of the security audit was that the resolution of the camera was sufficient (it was only a few years old), and that the installation of occupancy-sensing lighting (with motion readers directed to the bike area) would act as a deterrent while ensuring that the camera would capture effective images/footage.

Additionally, the cost of security solutions is resulting in some properties turning to Intrusion Detection Systems (IDS) in critical areas, such as prop-alarms and motion-sensing alarms, however it is important to ensure that the solutions proposed are not over-designed. A camera with facial recognition software and pan-tilt-zoom capacities is better suited to a high-traffic

airport rather than a condominium parking garage. At the same time, the security plan must confirm that the security equipment in place is both effective and is working in harmony with other security solutions used.

Following that, a plan for upgrading all security equipment at the end of its useful life should be included in both the security master plan and the reserve account funding schedule.

Policies and procedures

Policies and procedures are a result of security education of residents within the building, relying on human nature and consideration of the residents in protecting the property. As such, it is the lowest-cost security solution. For example, since it is difficult to ask residents to confront anyone trying to “tailgate” a resident, gaining unauthorized entry to the building, it is very helpful to have signage that reinforces the fact that all visitors to the building should be granted access by the unit they are visiting. Other security awareness pointers can be discussed at the AGM or included on the condominium website or in newsletters.

Rules can be put in place to help condominium management safeguard the condo’s well-being. As mentioned previously, this is where it becomes beneficial to have a security auditor that is familiar with condominium operations as proposed rules may be included in the security report. Having an auditor that knows the difference between a rule and a condominium bylaw (and how each are passed) will greatly assist the board of directors and condo manager in ensuring that they act effectively and efficiently to protect the corporation and all its assets (the most important being its residents).

In conclusion, there are many different options that are available to condominiums looking to increase the security of the property. Judging by the TD Canada Trust survey, these efforts may be required in order to maintain investor value and market share.

Scott Hill of 3D Security Services has been a practicing RCM with ACMO since 2012, a Physical Security Professional (PSP) with ASIS and a Certified Security Project Manager (CSPM) with the Security Industry Association.

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